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"Survival -- to keep writing": An interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim

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In this e-mail interview conducted in 2016, author and scholar Shirley Geok-lin Lim addresses the changing social and political conditions in the United States. Lim discusses the affective relationship between aesthetics and politics in her work, the anxiety of multilingual stylistics, and the in-between nature of the transnation. She also reflects on the academic marginalization she has experienced as a result of her immigrant designation and subjectivity, as well as the indirect influence of China and Chineseness on her writing. Commenting on her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces*, Lim notes the difficulty of titling, and addresses the impact of anglophone literature upon her during her colonial Malaysian upbringing.

Keywords: Shirley Geok-lin Lim; multilingualism; transnationalism; memoir; literary influences

Shirley Geok-lin Lim is one of the world's foremost anglophone writers of Malaysian descent. She has also emerged as a preeminent scholar of Asian American, ethnic, feminist and postcolonial literature, after immigrating to the United States in 1969 to undertake postgraduate study.

Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems (1980), Lim's first book of poetry, won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize. Since then, amongst many other honours, she has been presented with the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) Lifetime Achievement Award, and The American Book Award twice. Lim has published in a number of genres, though poetry remains the focus of her current writing. Her 12 books and chapbooks of poetry published to date include *No Man's Grove and Other Poems* (1985), *Monsoon History: Selected Poems* (1994a),

Walking Backwards: New Poems (2010), and *Mall Ballads: Hong Kong Festival Walk Poems* (2013). Of her poetic craft, Lim states that she is "unshakeably committed to the belief that a poem constructs a deliberate thought-full artifice, even as it simultaneously rises out of an uncalculated psychic tracing of feelings that cannot be otherwise retrieved, uncovered, discovered, intuited, or imagined" (2014, 187), and this fullness of thought and feeling is evident throughout her poetry.

Lim is also an author of prose fiction. She has published two novels: *Joss and Gold* (2001), a reinvention of the *Madame Butterfly* story set in Malaysia and Singapore; and *Sister Swing* (2006), a coming-of-age novel following three sisters as they move from their childhood home in Malaysia to a North American existence. She has also authored *Princess Shawl* (2008), a work of children's fiction, as well as three collections of short stories. Perhaps the most critical attention has been devoted to her memoir *Among the White Moon Faces* (1997). This project has, in Lim's words, been "chiefly read as US ethnic, [but] is in fact transnational, threading between at least two subjectivities, a Malaysian Chinese and an Asian American" (2007, 37).

Amongst Lim's numerous scholarly works, *Nationalism and Literature* (1993) and *Writing Southeast/Asia in English* (1994b) explore the relationships between language, literature and nation — a nexus of postcolonial concern also observable in Lim's responses during this interview. *The Forbidden Stitch* (Lim, Tsutakawa and Donnelly 1989), *Tilting the Continent* (Lim and Chua 2000), *Asian American Literature* (Lim 1999) and *Writing Singapore* (Lim, Poon and Holden 2009) have all anthologized works of Asian/Pacific American and South East Asian writing which might otherwise have remained critically under-acknowledged. Lim has also been influential in making transnational thought central to Asian American literary scholarship, and has co-edited two publications around the subject -- *Transnational Asia Pacific* (Lim, Smith and

Dissanayake 1999) and *Transnational Asian American Literature* (Lim, Gamber, Hong Sohn and Valentino 2006). She is also the author of several other co-edited volumes and journals, and numerous scholarly articles and chapters.

Lim's interest in transnationalism follows in part from her encounters with in-betweenness, and being part of both inner and outer circles of language and experience -- subjects that recur throughout this interview. Many of my questions in this interview were guided by an interest in the complexity of Lim's positionality, and she discusses here the multiplicity of positions she occupies or has been forced into. She is simultaneously an ethnic American and a foreign immigrant; a colonial subject, born in Malaysia (itself a "miscege-nation") while it was under Japanese occupation, and educated there under British colonial rule; a daughter from a Chinese Hokkien and Peranakan family; an anglophone but multilingual author from a postcolonial country where English is no longer favored; and a part of a globalizing world that is increasingly both more cross-border *and* more nationalist and exclusionary. (Post)colonialism has had a direct and indirect effect on Lim's life and work, and her formative literary experiences were provided by a colonial British education system. Those early literary encounters remain significant to Lim's ongoing practice, and they are combined now with a myriad of other global literary influences.

I first got in touch with Lim, now a Professor Emeritus at the University of California, Santa Barbara, whilst researching the Shirley Geok-lin Lim Papers archival collection, recently opened at the University of California Santa Barbara Library. She was at that time engaged in a lecture series in Xi'an, China -- a continuation of the long series of international residencies and visiting professorships she has assumed throughout her career -- and so this interview took place via a series of e-mails. Our correspondence coincided with a fraught and turbulent chapter of American history,

occurring just before and after the 2016 US Presidential Election. Lim addresses the Trump Presidency directly in this interview. And since, according to Lim, all writing is affected by changes to the writer's body, location, society and times, this interview bears traces of its context. In response to Trump's vision for America, Lim champions the continuation of Randolph Bourne's cosmopolitan vision for a "Trans-national America", a utopian goal that seems now as distant as ever. And yet, pressingly, vitally, Lim feels impelled to reconnect with this utopian line -- to imagine, to remain present, to survive, to keep writing.

Joe Upton (JU): As a scholar, you have long had an interest in transnational literature. Your own art has also often been categorized as such. Do you believe transnational literature can be aesthetically or formally characterized? If so, how do you feel that this is evinced in your work?

Shirley Geok-lin Lim (SGL)**:** My first recollection of raising issues of transnationalism in relation to US literary productions and the national canon was over four decades ago, at a Modern Language Association (MLA) conference in 1974, when Katharine Newman, the guiding force for the establishment of The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States (MELUS) was hosting a meeting of interested academics in her hotel room. Around a dozen scholars who had been working on Jewish American, African American and other ethnic US literary texts had met at the MLA in Chicago the year before, and they had sent word out to welcome all like-minded scholars to the New York informal gathering. Teaching at a community college in the bleak, burned-down heart of the South Bronx -- otherwise known as Fort Apache for the violence hammering its dispossessed inner-city minorities -- I was desperately

looking for a way to make relevant, by bringing into convergence, my doctoral training, literary passions, and in-between Malaysian-state/US-territorial mental conditions. I went to that MELUS meeting because I was wondering how a novel I was working on about just such mental conditions might be read, being neither Malaysian nor American but generated by an in-between imagination.

I approached Newman to ask about working on such "trans-national" US literature, and I specifically referenced the short stories an Indonesian author, Umar Kayam, had written about Indonesians sojourning in New York City (Kayam 1980). Harry Aveling, the translator, had solicited my help (kindly acknowledged in the book), when I was visiting my brother, Lim Teck Ghee, a historian at Universiti Sains, Penang, in summer 1974, when Aveling was also teaching there. Umar Kayam's stories defamiliarized American culture and society in a strikingly provocative manner, which resonated with my own experiences as an émigré/immigrant in the US. Newman was roundly dismissive of the idea; MELUS was organized to spotlight ethnic Americans, not foreigners in the US whose imaginaries were irrelevant to American identity undertakings. The former may be marginalized but remain within the circle of the imagined community; the latter were outside of that circle.

I did not challenge her or the organization then; and in fact cast my scholarly bet in the US with "ethnic American literature", choosing to work on "Asian American" and women's writing right up to the 1990s. Still, my own writing -- the poems, fictions, much of my other scholarship -- continued to be generated in that in-between-ness of the trans-nation. Intrinsically, I knew, felt, and was motivated by an US and Other dynamic. Call it ambivalence, double consciousness, locating in the dislocations, settling into the unsettled, the ever disobedient, displeasing, disloyal; the desire not for either/or, but for and/and; a promiscuity of unsatisfied belonging. In literature through

the millennia I glimpsed that shifting of place and self, the language sifting of unstable identities that should not, could not, be caught in the net of nationhood. And yet the MLA and 20th-century literary studies were rigorously fenced into national literatures, this despite the wars, revolutions, and uprisings that have continuously redrawn nations, so a writer like Rushdie could have been born in a region in India that became part of Pakistan after the partition; then immigrated and was read as a British author; and is now resident in the US, sometimes working in that peculiar California kingdom, Hollywood. Is Rushdie therefore a global author; an anglophone author; a postcolonial author, post-nation? Or is his work transnational? Or are the attempts to label such authors and their texts the hobgoblin aspirations of academics whose reputations rest on their ingenuity and inventiveness?

I drafted a very different response to this question, one that addressed the recent Presidential elections and the incoming Trump Presidency; the "alt-right"/white nationalist/anti-globalist (and clearly anti-transnational) phenomena and these inevitable effects on the discourses of transnationalism. But to avoid a lengthy rant on this matter, I ask for us all to turn again to Randolph Bourne's brilliant, wonderfully humanistic vision of the United States as transnational, a generous vision of a non-Anglo-Saxon, pluralist, cosmopolitan country forming a "beloved community" of inclusion. Well, the Trump nation will be the nadir of such hopes; and as serious intellectuals, we will have to theorize this alt-white-nationalist America that was always in the genetic formation of a slave society that drew its Darwinian power from dehumanizing entire human communities. With almost seven billion on the planet today, genocide as the means to establish its planetary control is the impossible dream. A possible dream is that this genetic deformation will evolve out of existence. In the meantime, Bourne's "Trans-national America" published in *The Atlantic* in July 1916, remains a utopian fantasy

when only a few years ago it had appeared a project within our grasp. My present urgent struggle is to stretch my imagination to a utopian reach while writing within the poetics of the quotidian; perhaps working out of a trans-real rather than transnational site.

JU: Recently, your poetry seems to have started tackling political issues and questions more explicitly, as in your poems about Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement in *Do You Live In?* (Lim 2015). How do you see politics and poetry informing one another?

SGL: The separation mandated between poetry and politics has always fascinated me. I looked at Aristotle's classification of the two for help in distinguishing the two phenomena/operations, and concluded that they speak to overlapping civilizational projects: one in the field of aesthetics, which is primarily my obsession; and the other the world of human action in which ethos and rhetoric are inextricably at work. Aesthetics without the substance of human action is mere artifice, decoration, signifying nothing. But in literary writing, politics cannot be manifested without poetics; without grace of wit and the elegance of intelligence, the mnemonics of style, politics in poetry is mere brutal bludgeon or pimped as propaganda. So, yes, some of my work, and perhaps lately more of it, is explicitly addressing political issues; even when it is not explicit, there is implicit allegory, contexts with political histories to them. But none of my work to my mind is political. What writers mine for their writing changes as their bodies, locations, societies and times change. My Hong Kong Umbrella Movement poems could not have been written had I not been living in Hong Kong that year and teaching Hong Kong undergraduates who shared their engagement in the Democracy protests with me.

JU: To what extent do China or Chineseness influence your art?

SGL: That my art has been influenced by "Chineseness" is inarguable. That it is influenced by "China" is more debatable, except insomuch as a strong negative serves as an influence, less an attraction and more a force that repels. Paradoxically, both "traditional", a.k.a. feudal China attacked by the Communists, and "modern" -- Communist -- People's Republic of China (PRC) are reprehensible to me. My brief visits to the PRC in the recent few years, carefully hosted by academic peers, have opened me to the humanity of individuals and behind them the people of China, just as my childhood among Malaysian Chinese, my extended family and close community have achieved this intimacy. "China" -- as diasporic concept, imaginary, and negative political power -- is addressed in my memoir, in my post-Hong-Kong-residency poetry, and in my later critical work.

"Chineseness", however, has been a major thematic in my work. Chineseness is that other language domain whose absence looms in every anglophone text I produce. It is the erased, aborted subject I have been approaching ever since I began consciously to place myself in a tradition of literature. But so has Malay been that other erased language, culture and subject. My mother was a Peranakan (native Malay-speaking, Chinese-social-observant woman), on whose plural-cultural identity I have over-layered my own anglophone, British-American formations. I do not deny the many Chinese-inflected images, surface references, civilizational values, even characters, in my writing, but these do not result from a Chinese identity.

The influences on art today more and more are cross-border, cross-national, cross-hatched-everything. My work is as much influenced by Romantic poets such as

Blake, Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth and early women writers as the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen and George Eliot as by American writers like Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros and Louise Erdrich. It is, sadly, almost wholly uninfluenced by Chinese literature (except for Lu Xun's wonderful short stories), although from Chinese paintings I have learned to appreciate their sparse blankness and precision -- what Ezra Pound found in his musings on Chinese calligraphy perhaps.

As an aside, I note that little has been made of V.S. Naipaul's "Indian-ess" and the matter of India's "influence" on his work or of Sri Lanka's influence on Michael Ondaatje; perhaps these may offer fertile research projects for scholars examining all "diasporic" writing.

JU: How important is bi- or multilingualism in your writing? What work do the untranslated non-anglophone words do in your poetry and prose?

SGL: My writing more than occasionally makes visible features of multilingualism, as in the untranslated incorporation of Malay and Hokkien linguistic items, and even more assertively so, in its shift of registers between Standard English and "Manglish" or "Singlish" (what Braj Kachru [1985] in his seminal model of English language world diffusion schematized as the Inner Circle of UK/US English and an Outer Circle of English deployed in UK/US postcolonial societies). When such non-Standard English stylistics appears in my work, I confess to a huge amount of anxiety on my part. In everyday speech, particularly when I am back "home" in Malaysia and Singapore or among my native compatriots wherever, as in an exilic space (the US, Canada, Australia, the UK, etc.), I slip almost involuntarily into this speech world, where

English, Malay and Hokkien come together in a powerful commingling (with Tamil, Portuguese, Arabic and other minor traces) of languages. Together, this patois offers a syncretic home that only those who have grown up in this miscege-nation can understand and vibrate to. *But* oral experiential speech is different from literary creation. As a disciplined literary scholar, I approach English as a rigorous practice that follows conventions of grammar, citation and more. In contrast, I struggle with the pressure to script orality, to give written testimony to multilingual voices. Chinua Achebe created the depth of his Igbo characters through his genius in translating Igbo proverbs and mentality into a limpid transparent English in which the heart of Igbo speech still beats. His has been my ideal of a bilingual stylistics, which I have not yet been able to approach. The work that such multilingual features achieves is the usual: to voice authenticity as a signified; to make something new; to give an accurate correspondence to a particular social world -- as in capturing all the hues of a rainbow; to get a remembered character, a memory, a fleeting detail to step forward with its non-anglophone presence.

JU: The naming your of your memoir, *Among the White Moon Faces: An Asian American Memoir of Homelands*, seems as if it was rather difficult enterprise. In a letter to the marketing team at the Feminist Press, you provided 20 possible titles, and referred to around 100 others previously submitted. The subtitle of the memoir has also been altered post-publication and varies across markets. How important or influential is the marketing of your work? Do you feel restricted to any extent by the perceived or voiced demands of the publishing industry?

SGL: Titles are a fraught aspect of the creative work. I began my life of writing with poetry; and the titles of my individual poems have never been gainsaid by editors and publishers. As far as my name as poet is recognized, it is recognized through works whose titles I generated singly. But you are correct that the memoir's title went through a fairly lengthy period of scrutiny, discussion, push back and collective decision. My initial titles, as I recall, focused on the memoir's postcolonial thrust -- for example, "Woman in the Shadow of Empire". I also went through my published poems, looking for lines and phrases that resonated with the memoir's interior life, "Breaking the Surface", for example -- a process that I had undertaken in titling my poetry collections. However, when I checked some of the titles I was considering, I discovered that a number of them had already been used; *Breaking the Surface* was the title of the memoir by the Olympics Gold Medal diver Greg Louganis (1995). The publication of the memoir was my first and so far the only experience I've had with marketing in publishing my work. I guess books of poetry do not sell well -- also, academic texts -- so there is not much pressure in finding a title that will help sell the book; and I was pretty well left alone with deciding on the titles for my novels. Feminist Press is based in Manhattan, New York, and perhaps its US metropolitan location, its venerable history and its influential board of trustees may have given the press a strong sense of publishing as a market industry. I was told that the publisher herself, Florence Howe, at first did not care for *Among the White Moon Faces,* but a board member who was a top editor in a big press really liked it, which was how Feminist Press finally went with this title out of the many, many I had offered. I did recycle some of the rejected titles to serve as chapter titles. The sub-title for the Feminist Press edition, "An Asian American Memoir of Homelands", was all my suggestion; I believed it encapsulated the core of the memoir, with the emphasis on the plurality of "Homelands". Seven years after the

memoir was published, after Sept 11, 2001, the singular term "Homeland" has taken a freaky American resonance in the overarching notion of "Homeland Security"! "Among the White Moon Faces" is a line from a poem, "Night Vision", published in my first collection *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems* (1980, 11). The poem speaks to the experience of a transplant/émigré/immigrant/exile whose birth/entry into the world is one surrounded by family and community but who acknowledges that she now wakes to a world where she is without family and community, the "white moon faces" of early family now replaced by "dust falling in the dark, in the house". The memoir is less an autobiography than it is about natal family, extended community, and history; but it is shadowed by the isolation and loneliness that the immigrant, at least this immigrant, experiences in the US. When the memoir was published in Singapore, the Singapore publisher noted that the subtitle with its bifurcated homelands might not speak easily to Asian readers; and so I agreed to change it to "A Memoir of a Peranakan Feminist", "Peranakan" (meaning a Straits-born Chinese) foregrounding its local placement in Malaysia and Singapore. That was a poor judgment of that particular market, the term "feminist", as I was told later, serving as a strong turn-off to both male and female readers from that region! I worked on my first novel for years with the tentative title, "Land of Lost Content", from A.E. Housman's poem, "Into my heart an air that kills" in *A Shropshire Lad;* but I decided on *Joss and Gold* as the two signifiers underline the novel's dialectical poles of Confucian pieties and capital-driven modernity that structure the novel's plot and characters' relations.

JU: Are there any projects that you are currently working on, or hope to engage with in the future?

SGL: Right now, I am focused on poetry -- writing it, thinking about it, planning to teach it, accepting invitations for public readings and workshops on poetry. As a child, at seven and eight, I fell in love with the music, color, stories, the universe of characters and sentiments compressed in those brief lines of poems I found in my brothers' school texts. To name some of them today is to raise hoots of satirical laughter and hear loud parodic echoes; imagine what Monty Python would do with "The Listeners" (de la Mare 1912), "The Charge of the Light Brigade" (Tennyson 1854), "Invictus" (Henley 1888), "Casabianca" (Hemans 1826), "The Village Blacksmith" (Longfellow 1840), "Leisure" (Davies 1911), "Sea Fever" (Masefield [1902] 1913), all of Robert Louis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses* (1885), not to mention the entire collection of Mother Goose verse. I never grew out of my childhood love of Victorian poetry, of Tennyson and A.E. Housman, for example. Rather, I added to these the poems of Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, later Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Theodore Roethke, William Carlos Williams, and even later Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Denise Levertov, and on and on. The only Malaysian poet whose work has influenced me, for many reasons in a complicated manner, is Ee Tiang Hong. Although he was a Malacca poet, born and raised a generation earlier in the very neighborhood where I was born and spent many formative childhood years, struggling with anglophone poetics which he memorably called a "mimicry of foreign birds" (Ee 1960, 24), I did not come across his poems until I was a third year undergraduate at the University of Malaya. Reading his poem, written in a kind of Malaysian pidgin, in a prestigious British literary journal radically changed my unalloyed attachment to a literary Brit. poetics. The irony of both voice and register was bold, brash, and obviously audible to an international reader. His first collection *I of the Many Faces* appeared in 1960, just a few years before I entered the university to be immersed in Shakespeare, Dryden, Pope, Keats and all. The influence of this

countryman poet clarified once I left Malaysia and made a tortuous academic journey to emerge as an American scholar and poet; my homesickness for Malacca/Malaysia, which I had been so eager to leave behind, in hindsight, was touched by Ee's Malacca poems. But that influence showed itself in the differences my diasporic turn took to his in Australia. It seemed to me his work remained mired in the bitter disappointment of a poet denied his rightful place in the Malaysian literary canon. His poems only tangentially celebrated origin, identity, family, community, landscape, even as their social and satirical critiques plangently lamented the political stripping away of historical promise and place that he and the Peranakan community which we were both born into suffered. That bitterness and anger would have beaten me down; psychologically I would not have been able to survive so many sorrows. Survival -- to keep writing -- is to be in a present, where the past is bone and memory in the present body. The general trend of the poetry that I hear in my head is formal; and that appears to be what I am returning to in my current work -- composing poems of the present tense, wherever that I am in that tense, whether listening to crows or to the political shit-talk in the US; what Robert Frost in "The Figure a Poem Makes" called "a momentary stay against confusion" (1939, iv).

Notes on contributor

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